

MARY CASSATT

by

MARGARET BREUNING



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Mary Cassatt, who has only received recognition as one of our foremost artists, presents the anomaly of being a thorough American, although spending the greater part of her life in Paris, and acquiring her distinctive style while under French influences. Reversing the old legend of Antaeus, who received new strength each time that he touched his native earth, Miss Cassatt only discovered her innate powers when she was in a foreign land.

Pictures found only in American collections are in this monograph, the first of its kind ever to be published. The eight reproductions in full-color and the forty-eight black and white half-tone lithographs exhibited in this volume are the final choice made from the hundreds of works of art owned by famous private collectors and institutions in America. Many of them have never been reproduced before.

Margaret Breuning, now contributing critic for "*The Art Digest*," was formerly the "*New York Post's*" and the "*Journal-American's*" art critic. American born, her background includes many years abroad and study in Europe's great museums.

Thanks to the enthusiastic co-operation of The Brooklyn Museum, New York, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, Durand-Ruel, New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The National Gallery of Art,

(Continued on back flap)


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THE MORNING TOILET

1886 Oil 29½" x 24½"

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. Chester Dale Collection (Loan)

MARY
CASSATT

by

MARGARET BREUNING

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MARY CASSATT, who has only recently received recognition as one of our foremost artists, presents the anomaly of being a thorough American, although spending the greater part of her life in Paris, and acquiring her distinctive style while under French influences. Reversing the old legend of Antæus, who received new strength each time that he touched his native earth, Miss Cassatt only discovered her innate powers when she was in a foreign land.

Mary Cassatt was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1848. While still a young child she visited Paris with her parents, remaining there for five years. On her return, the family settled in Philadelphia. Here with wealth and social prestige as her environment, she might well have become a conventional young lady of the fashionable world. However, while still young, she felt art to be her *metier* and, also, recognized that while in America she would obtain small chance of development in such a career. It was a moment of low ebb for Art in this country. Not only did art instruction consist principally of drawing from casts, but there was no opportunity to see great works of art as incentive and inspiration. The majority of contemporary artists fled to Europe, particularly to Paris, where soon enrolled in some famous *atelier*, conducted by an Academic master, they became oblivious of the new movements of the art world around them and were thoroughly inoculated with the Academic virus.

Miss Cassatt's procedure was in complete contrast to this accepted performance. When she left with mem-

bers of her family for Europe she sought no formal teaching, but began that long, arduous course of self-instruction which was to culminate in her brilliant, original ideology of expression.

She first visited Italy, where she studied Parmigiano and Corregio, whose influence may be felt in some of her earliest paintings. After eight months in Italy, she visited Spain and at the Prado fell under the spell of Rubens. It was, doubtless, an overwhelming experience



HEAD IN PROFILE AND SMALLER FACE

Dry-point 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 16 $\frac{1}{6}$ "

Courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum, New York

for a young artist of great sensibility. Intensive study of his work led her to leave Madrid and go to Antwerp to see more of his paintings. If in one of her first canvases — two young girls throwing bonbons at the Carnival — there are traces of the peculiar charm and subtlety of Corregio, in other early pictures, such as that of bullfighters and the head of a young girl, executed at Rome, the influence of Rubens is evident.

Once in Paris, where she took up her residence with her family, with none of the financial worries that usually burden artists at the outset of their career, she entered no *atelier* or attempted any affiliation with the official Academic art then dominant. It is true that at the insistence of her family, she was obliged to enter the studio of Charles Chaplin, a prominent artist of the Academic School, but this connection was as brief as undesired by the young artist. She soon allied herself with the most unpopular, the most derided, the most misunderstood movement of the day, Impressionism. Emphasis should be laid on the fact that it was the work of these artists which attracted her and not personal relations, for at the time of this decision she was not acquainted with any of them. Rather she was drawn to their work by affinities of taste and sensitive perception. This independence of spirit and boldness of judgment are characteristics that marked her whole life. That a young, inexperienced girl with no prompting should decide that she disliked the conventions of the art then popular and discover for herself in the unappreciated work of the Impressionists exactly the qualities which appealed to her reveals unusual powers of discernment. It was after this momentous decision that she declared that she "began to live."

The work of Degas especially attracted her. Before she had met him she had bought one of his pastels and some of his small paintings. She became his disciple, never his pupil, making a patient and absorbing study of his work — then generally despised; and in it discovered the classical characteristics to be felt in all great French art. For Degas, stemming from Ingres and his classical tradition, can never be really reckoned as one of the Impressionists. Few people shared this enthusiasm for Degas, but her clarity of judgment discerned in the originality of his approach to art and in the delicacy of his visual perceptions qualities that awakened



THE BONNET

Dry-point $7\frac{3}{8}'' \times 5\frac{3}{8}''$

Courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum, New York

her admiration and respect. Later, when she became acquainted with him, she received his criticism and suggestions gratefully. A curious professional *rapprochement* existed between them based not on personal relations.

She began to etch early as discipline, for the line on the copper plate with no adventitious charms of color reveals the artist's weakness or strength of draftsmanship. Often she made preparatory studies for paintings in etchings. Through this self-imposed discipline, her line became virile, yet sensitive, with almost imperceptible modulations of depth which imparted animation to forms and gave lightness to the strength of her design. When Degas first viewed some of her work, although by no means a gracious critic, he was surprised into exclaiming, "I do not admit that a woman can draw so well."

Studying her drawings and prints, it is not difficult to realize her untiring and passionate research for the correspondence of contours, for the exact notations of natural forms. If the etchings, made as studies for later canvases are compared with these later paintings, the greater simplicity of the finished work is obvious.

Factual veracity is still apparent, but there is also a definite generalization, an approach to abstract, geometrical design. Moreover, without any sacrifice of carefully observed form, a greater ease and fluency, an elegance of expression continued to gain in her work. In the comparatively few lithographs which she executed, something of the influence of Holbein may be distinguished, as it may be occasionally in her other work.

Miss Cassatt's early absorption in realism is marked. Not only did she study Degas, but Manet and Courbet, as well—in fact, often preferring Courbet to Manet however brutal his expression frequently was at times, because of his complete sincerity. It is not improbable that in her determined search for perfection of handling, she felt sympathy with Courbet's emphasis on good workmanship. If the influence of Degas is felt in such a canvas as *Woman Reading in Garden*, with its decorative arabesque of design, its almost imperceptible blending of color, its pigment that seems to flow in conformity with the tones it depicts, in such a canvas as *Woman in Black*, there is no escaping Manet. Like all three of these artists, Miss Cassatt was interested in contemporary subject matter. In addition, the reaction making itself felt against the meretricious facility and banality of the Academic pseudo-classicism, was being echoed in literature in the new movement of realism. Huysmans and Zola, frank exponents of realism, made a strong appeal to her at this time, as she often confessed in later life.

Undoubtedly, there were other motives which turned the young artist to her ardent pursuit of realism. It seems evident that she wished to avoid any semblance of that sentimentality, which then was considered characteristic of a woman's art. Strength, not sweetness, truth, not romance were her objectives from the outset. She had no desire to become a "lady painter;" she never merited that ignominious appellation. Her own nature, self-contained, fastidious, contemptuous of the facile was consonant with realism.

The next phase of Miss Cassatt's work came through contact with Japanese art, which had already influenced the Impressionists. She was desirous of gaining, not so much the sense of fugitive movement that Degas derived from this art, as its elimination of all but essentials.

The *notan* of Japanese prints, that apparently unsystematic spotting of dark and light masses, which are in reality artfully and subtly balanced for all their apparent irregularity, fostered exquisite adjustment of tones and highly decorative patterns. A further appeal lay in the high horizons and decentralized compositions of these prints suggesting an escape from conventional and accepted formulas of design. In the colored dry-point, *Woman Bathing*, she reveals her ability to adapt this "off-center" type of design to her own conceptions. At times, in her early adaptations of Japanese methods, the paring down of her subject to its barest essentials results, perhaps, in too great explicitness of expression lacking the completeness of esthetic content that she finally secured in all her work.

Her choice of theme, which she never abandoned, the mother and child motive although executing portraits of her family and intimate circle as well as scenes of the life about her, may seem at variance with her attitude towards art. But these mothers which she represents are no starry-eyed Madonnas gazing worship-



YOUNG GIRL WITH BONNET

c. 1900 Lithograph in bistre 20½" x 16¾"
Courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum, New York

fully at their children, but healthy young women taking delight in the charms of the young lives entrusted to them. She sought no symbolism but the poignant expression of the relation between mother and child, the affecting contrast between the mature figure and the immaturity of childhood. The physical basis as well as the psychological basis of this relation is stressed with an objectivity that reflected her own nature.

It is, moreover, an objectivity in harmony with the relentless logic of the French viewpoint. As she often related, she had a remote French ancestry so that something of the Gallic strain may have persisted in her temperament.

When one realizes that the majority of these children are scarcely more than infants, it is remarkable how much characterization she has given them. These young creatures, whose features are hardly formed, or whose personalities are as yet undefined are endowed not only with childish grace of gesture and vivacity of movement, but also with an unescapable suggestion of character. Keen observation and penetrating psychological insight are responsible for her representations of children in which the soundness of plastic form, exquisite textures of childish flesh, irrepressible vitality are no more apparent than this hint of dawning powers. Often

the mother is sacrificed in the interest of this revelation of childhood, but the group is always firmly integrated into sound design and enveloped in an ambience of atmosphere. It is not an anecdotal appeal which gives such interest to these themes, but the complete development of a conception where the idea and its expression are one.

It is in her prints, undoubtedly, that the artist's gifts are most marked, where it is impressive to observe the virility of her line, at once delicate and precise, the balance of the large simplified planes made piquant by the sharp contrasts of linear pattern. Her technical performance in these prints is no less than astonishing. Varying her work from pure etching to dry-point, she mastered a technique absolutely unique in the practice of color-printing. In these color prints, an aquatint grain was applied to the plate in fine-grained, light tones to which the colored inks adhered closely, then outlines were drawn in dry-point. At first she had the assistance of a professional printer in the work, but soon became entirely proficient in the exacting process, producing some of her finest prints by this method. The brilliance of color, the concentration on essentials, the breadth of design and piquancy of linear pattern mark, perhaps, her finest achievement. Through Japanese influence she acquired the effective foreshortening of figures and the exotic flavor of "off-center" design, but the breadth of the conceptions and the felicity of their expression are entirely due to the artist's originality and her refinement of perception.

Although her color prints reveal her inventiveness and distinction in their enchanting color patterns and her paintings and pastels show that she acquired a broader handling of brushwork with greater depth of color than most of her fellow Impressionists, she was from the first distrustful of color. She feared its temptation to hide soundness of modelling and of giving superficial charm rather than totality of effect. But as her technical mastery grew in all her chosen mediums, she achieved brilliancy with no suggestion of mere facility or of letting down of her integrity of draftsmanship. The pastel, *Little Girl With Dog*, although actually lush in its flowing color, reveals how relentlessly she sought beneath the charm of surface the soundness of form and substance and the truth of physical gesture.



CHILD'S HEAD Colored crayon 11¼" x 13½"
The Art Institute of Chicago, Carter H. Harrison Gift

Miss Cassatt was always self-critical. In spite of the fact that she exhibited with the Impressionists a few years after her arrival in Paris, it was not until 1891 that she felt ready to hold a one-man show — a period of seventeen years. An incident which illustrates how far she was from wishing to assert herself occurred when she showed an early painting to her friend, Mrs. Havemeyer. It was the portrait of one of her relatives, which she, herself, considered both a good portrait and a good picture but which met with no approval from the sitter or her family. It is the delightful portrait, *Lady at the Tea Table*, in which the deep masses of color in the dress are so arrestingly contrasted with the delicate modelling of the head and the play of gay colors in the tea service. Mrs. Havemeyer realizing Miss Cassatt's disappointment in the reception of this picture, insisted on the exhibition of the canvas with the result that both the Luxembourg and the Petit Palais were desirous of securing it. Later, however, the artist presented it to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, wondering deprecatingly if such a gift were worth while when she "was so little known at home."

Miss Cassatt's relations with the American art world could hardly be considered felicitous. In 1879 she sent two paintings to the Society of American Artists in New York — probably, the first Impressionist pictures to be shown in this country. The criticism on these works was far from favorable. She accepted the invitation to join this Society, but did not send another canvas to them for ten years. Yet her influence on American art was far from negligible. Travelling through Italy, Spain and Flanders with the Havemeyer family in search of pictures, her impeccable taste is in large measure responsible for the formation of the splendid Havemeyer Collection, which not only reached America, but through many of its choicest items forms an important part of the present collection of French art in the Metropolitan Museum.

It is almost impossible to chronicle Miss Cassatt's life except in terms of her work. The position in society to which the distinction of her family and her wealth entitled her, did not interest her. In her passionate, almost fanatical, devotion to her work, her life may well be summed up. She went to her studio at eight o'clock in the morning remaining there until light failed



HEAD OF A WOMAN

Pastel 12" x 12"

Courtesy of The City Art Museum, St. Louis

her, then devoted her evenings to graphic work. As far as her associations were concerned, she led much the same life that she would have pursued as an artist in America. The life of Paris surged about her, but scarcely touched her. She became acquainted with the artists of the Impressionist group and retained an interest in her little circle of friends in Philadelphia. One or two brief trips to America, her journeyings with the Havemeyers and a visit to Egypt were the only diversions she allowed herself from her incessant application to her chosen work. Fortunately, her physique was as rugged as her will was strong. Not until her late years when eyesight failed her did she lay down brush and needle.

Although not seeking them, many honors came to her. After her first showing of oils and dry-points, she held a large and more varied exhibition of her works two years later. In 1904, she was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor and in the same year refused the N. W. Harris prize, awarded her by the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1910 she was elected as Associate Member of the National Academy of Design and in 1914 was presented with the Gold Medal of the Pennsylvania Museum of the Fine Arts — her acceptance of this honor is the only instance of this kind. Her works were ac-



ELSA'S CHILD SMILING
1898 Dry-point 16 $\frac{1}{6}$ " x 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ "
Courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

quired by the Luxembourg Museum and by private collectors in France, while in America they appeared in all important public collections.

During the latter part of her life, she lived at her

Château Beaufresne, at Mesnil-Theribus, near Beauvais, where an impairment of her vision increased to almost complete blindness. The loss of relatives and friends shadowed her life, already isolated, and brought home to her the loneliness of a stranger in a strange land.

Her mind remained keen and active, her interests broad. Her personal distinction never deserted her nor her imperious will. The friends who visited her in those last years have given ample testimony to her unrelenting passion for art. They all record her conviction that American artists no longer needed to seek Paris for instruction nor the opportunity to study the great masters; such an era was closed with the improved methods of teaching in American schools and the opening of great public collections. America, she felt, should now be the training ground for American artists.

On June 19, 1926, she died at the age of eighty-one, having by her single-minded devotion to art and by the importance of her achievement raised the position of a woman artist to the high level that no one had previously considered possible.

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GIRL WITH DOG

Courtesy of Durand-Ruel, New York

1908 Pastel 20 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ "



CARESSE ENFANTINE

Oil 33" x 27½"

The National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.



YOUNG GIRL IN GREEN BONNET

Oil 16½" x 13½"

The National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.



LADY AT THE TEA TABLE

Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

1885 Oil 29" x 24"



THE FAMILY

Courtesy of Durand-Ruel, New York

c. 1887 Oil 32" x 26"



WOMAN WITH A DOG

c. 1889 Oil 39" x 26"

Courtesy of The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.



A CUP OF TEA 1880 Oil 25½" x 36½"
Courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



GIRL IN BONNET Oil 26" x 20"
Courtesy of The Fine Arts Gallery, San Diego



THE FITTING

c. 1891 Dry-point and aquatint (color) 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 10 $\frac{1}{8}$ "

Courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum, New York



THE LETTER

1891 Dry-point and aquatint (color) $13\frac{5}{8}'' \times 8\frac{1}{8}''$
The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection



WOMAN READING IN A GARDEN

1880 Oil 35½" x 23⅝"

The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. A. J. Beveridge in Memory of Delia Spencer Field



MOTHER AND CHILD

. The Art Institute of Chicago, Potter Palmer Collection

1892 Pastel 29" x 33"



GARDINER GREENE HAMMOND, JR.

1898 Pastel 21" x 27"

Courtesy of Mrs. Esther Fiske Hammond, Santa Barbara



AFTER THE BATH

Pastel 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 39 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

Collection of The Cleveland Museum of Art. Colorplate: © Art Education, N. Y.



YOUNG GIRLS

The John Herron Art Institute, Indianapolis

Pastel 25" x 20³/₄"



GIRL SEATED

Courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum, New York

Dry-point 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ "



YOUNG GIRL IN LARGE HAT

Courtesy of Durand-Ruel, New York

1901 Oil 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 25 $\frac{5}{8}$ "



MOTHER AND CHILD

Courtesy of The Cincinnati Art Museum

Oil 29" x 23 1/2"



IN THE GARDEN

1893 Pastel 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ "

Courtesy of Miss Etta Cone, Baltimore



WOMAN AND CHILD DRIVING

1881 Oil 35¼" x 51½"

The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Wiltach Collection



THE BATH

1892 Dry-point and aquatint (color) 12⁵/₆" x 9⁵/₆"

Courtesy of Durand-Ruel, New York



THE CUP OF TEA

1891 Dry-point and aquatint (color) 13 $\frac{11}{16}$ " x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



YOUNG MOTHER SEWING

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. O. Havemeyer Collection

Oil 36 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 29"



WOMEN AND CHILD

Pastel 26" x 32"

Courtesy of The Detroit Institute of Arts



MOTHER AND CHILD (The Mirror)

Courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum, New York

1900 Oil 28" x 20 $\frac{5}{8}$ "



COIFFURE

c. 1891 Dry-point and aquatint (color) 14 $\frac{7}{16}$ " x 10 $\frac{9}{16}$ "

Courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum, New York



WOMAN BATHING

c. 1891 Dry-point and aquatint (color) 14 $\frac{5}{16}$ " x 10 $\frac{5}{16}$ "
Courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum, New York



STUDY FOR THE BANJO LESSON

Courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

c. 1895 Pastel 17" x 17"



AT THE OPERA

Courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

1880 Oil 31½" x 25½"



IN THE TRAMWAY
c. 1891 Dry-point and aquatint (color) $14\frac{5}{16}'' \times 10\frac{1}{2}''$
Courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum, New York



THE TOILET

1894 Oil 39" x 26"

The Art Institute of Chicago, Robert Alexander Waller Memorial Collection



CHILDREN PLAYING WITH A CAT

Courtesy of Durand-Ruel, New York

1908 Oil 31 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 39 $\frac{1}{4}$ "



WOMAN IN BLACK

Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Buell Hammett, Santa Barbara

Oil 17½" x 23"



MOTHER WITH TWO CHILDREN

Courtesy of The Milch Galleries, New York

Oil 36" x 29"



MISS MARY ELLIS

The National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection (Loan)

Oil 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ "



NURSING

c. 1891 Dry-point $9\frac{5}{8}'' \times 7''$

Courtesy of The New York Public Library



MOTHER AND BABY

c. 1891 Dry-point 10 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ "

Courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



MATERNITY

1891 Dry-point and aquatint (color) 13 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 9"
Courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



GIRL IN A BLUE HAT

Courtesy of Durand-Ruel, New York

1908 Oil 18" x 15"



THE LOGE

Pastel on paper 11½" x 8¾"

Courtesy of The Cincinnati Art Museum, Mary Hanna Collection

Washington, D. C., the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and virtually all the collectors in the entire country whose facilities were generously made available to the editor, a permanent exhibition of Cassatt paintings comes into the possession of each owner of this volume.

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